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ABSTRACT

School-age child care is part of an array of services that young children may need and that can be appropriately included under the category of early childhood programs. At the federal, state, and local levels, schools are emerging as a focus for school-age care policy and program initiatives. This trend is a reflection of a growing pressure for more responsive schools. However, school boards are reluctant participants. Concern exists about fiscal liability if financing can't be assured. It is feared that parents will pressure the school board to fund the programs. Financing and program quality are major problems. Yet another problem of programs provided by schools is market equity. In several states, providers have sued schools on the grounds of unfair competition. Unless public education redefines its boundaries to include child care, a two-tiered approach will continue to characterize school-based child care, with the school-age programs constituting a second tier of services that families want and schools try to provide. Issues surfacing in school-affiliated school-age care include salary differentials, staff retention, and affordability. Concluding remarks offer recommendations for state and local public school involvement in school-age child care. (RH)

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Public Schools and School-Age Child Care

National Conference on Early Childhood Issues: Policy Options
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School-age child care is part of an array of services that
young children may need and that can be appropriately
included under the category of early childhood programs.
Many of the children currently using after school/before
school services are in the 5-8 year old age group. School-
age care should be therefore considered as an extension of
our concern about the twin themes of care and education of
young children; the pre-K children of today will become the
kindergarteners of tomorrow.

For many children entering school today, part day or even
extended or full school-day kindergarten doesn't provide
comprehensive coverage of their needs for continuous care
arrangements. When children enter school, many mothers
enter or reenter the labor force. But because public
schools continue to operate on schedules bearing little
resemblance to most parents' working schedules, during

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before and after school hours many children must be provided for in child care settings, by family members, or neighbors.

A service industry has begun to develop over the past decade to serve these children and their parents. One of the most significant parts of this industry is the public education system. At the federal, state, and local level, schools are emerging as a focus for policy and program initiatives:

FEDERAL LEVEL

The Dependent Care Block Grant is a \$30 million development program for the states based on an earlier version, the School Facilities Child Care Act. This bill targeted schools, in partnership with others, as the locus of school-age care programs. The Social Services Block Grant is another source of funding for public school-based programs, and an indeterminate number of schools are managing those dollars for low-income children. Desegregation funds are yet another source of funds for school-age child care in schools that offer before and after school care as a magnet activity.

STATE LEVEL

At least 14 states now have their own legislation authorizing funding for school-age child care. Most states encourage schools either to apply for funds or to be collaborators with other community agencies. As in the case of the Dependent Care Block Grant, most states run these

monies through Departments of Social Services rather than Education - but in 8 states the Dependent Care Grants are administered by Departments of Education.

Also at the state level, enabling legislation has been written in a number of states that permits schools to lease space to others or to run programs. Usually this legislation does not also provide funding.

LOCAL LEVEL

Local districts are increasingly involved; in 1988 the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) surveyed elementary and middle school principals. 22% of the more than 1200 surveyed reported having some kind of before/after school program, up from 7% reported in 1972.

This trend is in fact a reflection of a growing pressure for more responsive schools - from parents; from community agencies; from state legislators. The model tends to be collaborative: partnerships between schools and other youth agencies, day care organizations, and civic groups. An increasing number of schools appear to be running their own programs: New York City, New Orleans, Louisiana, Arlington, VA, and St. Paul, Minn are among them.

But it is a mixed picture. For example, school boards are still reluctant participants. There is concern about fiscal liability if financing can't be assured and it is feared

that parents will pressure the school board to fund the programs. In many communities the schools aren't offering school-age child care or space for it; In some areas teachers are the only staff permitted by their unions to work in after school programs. This results in teacher burnout, an unaffordable program, or exploitation of non-union line staff who do the direct care of the children at lower wages.

Financing is a major problem. Those who see simple solutions to the need for child care deriving from putting public schools to the task forget that it all costs money. While it is true that many programs are funded by parent fees (65% of the NAESP survey) this implies that parents who can't pay don't get the service. Many school-age care programs are only permitted by school boards to operate if they are self-supporting (both school-run and non school-run). Without coordinated approaches to funding for low-income children, schools risk becoming entrepreneurs selling services to those who can pay. School administrators are reluctant to do school-age child care without sufficient money, staffing, and improved facilities. The NAESP survey shows the current breakdown of financing: In addition to parent fees, community organizations provide 14%, school system 6%; individual school budget 2%, parent organization of the school .9% and combination of all sources 7.6%. The inference can be made that many school

systems serve parents who cannot provide that level of financial support for their children's after school care, and other sources of funding are either unknown to the schools or unavailable.

Quality is another issue, particularly in school-run programs. With a poor conceptual framework for what an informal educational program should or could look like, the temptation is to either over structure it or understructure it. School run programs are not the only ones that are poorly conceptualized. There still is a lack of consensus about how these programs should function. When schools keep costs low as a way to make services available to more families - one way out of the dilemma of a public education agency offering exclusive services. But cost-cutting often results in poor quality. For example, in programs where ratios are 1:25 program quality is bound to suffer; yet some schools are known to maintain such ratios.

And yet another problem in school-provision is what I would call "market equity". As attention turns to the public schools as a locus for child care, private providers ask, "what will happen to me?" In several states providers have sued schools on the grounds of "unfair competition". While no suit has been won by providers the implications must be taken seriously. Private sector programs, both for-profit and not-for-profit have expertise and have been meeting

community needs for a long time. There clearly is a need to maintain these community institutions, alongside schools, as an important resource for community living. Thus an equilibrium should be maintained with equal resources going to develop the provision by both sectors.

Conclusion

School age child care programs of necessity ^{augment} ~~argument~~ the hours, days, and seasons when school is closed. A broad interpretation of how public schools could respond to family concerns about care and supervision of school age children would include extended hours, length of year, increasing support like transportation from school to child care; and other family responsive services. In the absence of such changes, school-age child care programs represent a kind of under-layer: a school within a school isn't quite the metaphor, but rather a second tier of services that families want and that schools are trying to incorporate. Unless public education redefines its boundaries to include child care (which is both unlikely and undesirable as an across the board policy), this two-tier approach will continue. It can meet several needs. The model can profitably continue to be the school based model in which either schools or community organizations are the sponsor, or a variation on that theme where schools contribute resources to a joint community effort-transportation, support services and such. Issues that will have to be resolved are financing, quality, equity for families, equity in terms of other providers.

Services are not being made available to special needs school-agers; older children are poorly served by existing models. The issues surfacing in school affiliated school-age care are the same issues that surface across child care: salary differentials, staff retention, affordability. Schools then, if they join the delivery system, may well also join in its problems and in finding solutions. I would like to close by making the following recommendations about state and local public school involvement in school-age child care:

1. State and local policies should be enacted to permit and encourage schools to offer low-cost space for partnerships or to provide school-age care. Transportation policy should permit schools to seek reimbursement for transportation to community child care settings in the afternoons.
2. Schools with the intention of operating programs should carefully craft the staffing and salary policy. There should be a goal to move away from inequitable salaries between groups of staff with essentially comparable training and experience.
3. If schools are to serve all children who need before and after school care, they must explore

relationships with state and local funding sources including private sector contributions so as to develop a capacity to serve low-income and children with special needs.

4. Quality programs for young children should offer continuity of care-in settings, in care-givers, in program content. No after school program should short-change children by being less important --to the school, to the principal, to the school system.